PEGGY HOLCOMB DOW
(1780–1820)

Chapter One
Early Life and Marriage to Lorenzo Dow

I was born in the year 1780 in Granville, Massachusetts, of parents that were strangers to God -- although my father was a member of the Church of England, and my mother had been raised by pious parents of the Presbyterian order. Whether my mother had any sense of the necessity of the new birth and holiness of heart, I cannot say, for she was called to a world of spirits when I was but five months old. She left behind six children -- two sons and four daughters. The eldest, my sister Hannah, was about fifteen years old.

My father remarried about six months after the death of my mother. Although the woman he married was a good and industrious housewife, my father lost his property and was reduced low by the sinking of continental money. As a consequence, the children were scattered. Hannah had married when I was six years old, and she prevailed upon my father to give me to her. He did, and I was carried off into the state of New York and saw his face no more.

The summer past, in my journey to the east, I met with a half-brother whom I had not seen for twenty-seven years -- and with whom my father was living when he died. I also was with one of my sisters, whom I had not seen but once for twenty-seven years. She, being nine or ten years older than myself, was able to inform me of some particulars concerning my mother's death. These were a consolation to me.¹

My tender heart was very often wrought upon by the Spirit of God. HI was at times very unhappy for fear that I should die and of what would become of my soul. I was early taught that there was a God, a heaven and hell. I knew that there was a preparation necessary to fit me for those mansions of rest prepared for all that are faithful unto death. My heart often mourned before God, young as I was, for something (I scarce knew what!) to make me happy. I dared not sleep without praying to God, as well as I knew how, for many years.

My sister's husband was a man not calculated to gain the world. They had no children, and I was raised to labor as much as my strength would permit -- and perhaps more, as my constitution was very delicate from my birth. But the Lord was my helper. Though I knew him not by an experimental knowledge, yet I had a fear of him before my eyes. He that taketh care of the young
ravens cared for me. From the time that I was six years of age until I was eleven, my serious impressions never left me.

But from twelve to fifteen, I was mixing with those that were unacquainted with God or things that pertain to the kingdom of heaven. My mind was taken up with the vanities of this present world—although my heart was often tender under the preaching of the gospel so that I could weep and mourn. Yet I did not seek the Lord in earnest to the saving of my soul. Then, at the age of fifteen, the Lord laid his rod upon me in taking away my health—which was not restored until I was seventeen. In that time I was much afraid that I should be called to pass the dark valley, but the Lord was pleased to restore me to health again in a good degree.

At the age of nineteen, I set out to seek my soul's salvation, through many trials and difficulties. The Methodists' preaching and zeal were new in that part of the country where I lived at the time, and my sister's husband was very much opposed to them. Although that made it very trying, I was determined, come what might, that I would take up my cross and follow Jesus in the way. I was willing. I gave up all my young companions and all the diversions of which I had been very fond—such as dancing and company that feared not God. The Lord, who giveth liberally and upbraideth not, gave me peace and consolation in him. My sister and myself joined the first society that was raised in that part of the country, at a neighborhood called Fish Creek. It was about four miles from where we lived, and we attended preaching and class-meeting there once a week. The Lord was very precious to my soul in those days.

About that time, my brother-in-law was brought to see himself as a sinner and embraced religion. Although but three in number, we were a happy family. We often felt like heaven begun below; Jesus was precious to our souls. The preachers made our house their home, at that time, and it was my delight to wait on them. I felt as if I could lie at their feet and learn instruction from their lips. My chief delight was in going to meeting and praising and singing praises to my God and Saviour.

We had preaching once in two weeks in our neighborhood. For nearly two years, few attended. Yet the preachers continued to preach, in faith believing, and the Lord heard and gave them their hearts' desire. They formed a little class consisting of only seven; my brother-in-law and sister, two other men and their wives, and myself, composed the society in the place where I lived. From the beginning, we had class-meeting and prayer-meeting every week. It was but a few months before the Lord burst the cloud, and the work broke out. Sixty or seventy were added to the number.
We had precious times of the out-pouring of the Spirit of God. If we met only for prayer-meeting, oftentimes our meetings would last until twelve or one o'clock. Souls would be so filled with divine love that they would fall prostrate on the floor and praise Christ their King. We continued like this, to love like children in one family, for two or three years. When difficulties took place, however, none were turned out of the society. O how sweet it is for the brethren to dwell together in unity! But how often doth the enemy of mankind make use of that most destructive weapon, division, to destroy the fallen race of Adam. O that Christians would make a stand against him and live and love like children of one family -- that the world might say, "See how these Christians love one another!"

After this I lived in love and union with my brethren for two years or more. I enjoyed the privilege of attending preaching services and class-meetings, and I had many seasons precious to my soul.

About this time [i.e., fall 1802], "camp-meetings" began to be introduced into that part of the country. They were attended with the power of God in the conversion of many precious souls. There was one about thirty miles from where I then lived, and my brother-in-law attended it. It was there he met Lorenzo Dow, who was on his way to Canada. My brother-in-law invited Lorenzo home with him, to preach at our preaching-house. He sent on the appointment a day or two beforehand, so that the people might get notice. As Lorenzo Dow was a singular character, we were very anxious to see and hear him. When the day arrived, he came. The house was crowded and we had a good time. Nevertheless, I was very much afraid of him, as I had heard such strange things about him.

My brother-in-law invited him to our home, but he did not come for several days. He had appointments to preach twice or thrice a day. At last he came, however, and tarried all night. The next morning he was to preach five or six miles from our house. Little did I think he had any thoughts of marrying, in particular that he should make any proposition of the kind to me, but so it was. He returned that day to dinner. In conversation with my sister concerning me, he inquired of her how long I had professed religion. She told him the length of time. He requested to know whether I kept wicked company. She told him I did not. Then she observed that I had often said, "I would rather marry a preacher than any other man, provided I was worthy, and I would wish him to travel and to be useful to souls."

By this time I happened to come into the room, and he asked me if I had made any such remarks. I told him I had. He then asked me if I would accept marriage of such an object as him. I made him no reply, but went directly out of the room. It was the first time he had spoken to me, and I was very much surprised. He
gave me to understand that he would return to our house again in a few days and have more conversation with me on that subject. After attending a meeting ten or twelve miles from where I lived, he did return.

When he returned and spoke to me on the subject again, he told me that he would marry provided he could find one that would consent to his traveling and preaching the gospel. If I thought I could be willing to marry him and give him up to go and do his duty — and not see him, perhaps, or have his company more than one month out of thirteen — he would marry. But if I could not be willing to let him labor in the vineyard of his God, he dared not make any contract of the kind. He could not enjoy peace of mind in any other sphere. He told me I must weigh the matter seriously before God, whether I could make such an engagement and conform to it and not stand in his way so as to prevent his usefulness to souls.

I thought I would rather marry a man that loved and feared God, and that would strive to promote virtue and religion among his fellow-mortals, than any other. Although I felt myself inadequate to the task, without the grace of God to support me, yet I felt willing to cast my lot with his. I would be a help and not a hindrance to him, if the Lord would give me grace. I had no doubt that God would give me grace, if I stood as I ought, and I accepted of Lorenzo's proposal.

He was then on his way to Canada, and from thence to the Mississippi territory. He did not expect to return in much less than two years. Then, if providence spared and the way should be open for a union of that kind, we would be married. But even in that case, as well as in all others of such importance, we would strive to lay it before the Lord. We desired to be directed by him, as far as we could judge, and not to rush precipitately into a state that so much concerned our happiness in this world and the next. I suspect not many engage in the holy bands of matrimony to do all in their power to make the silken cord not prove a chain of iron, without considering its importance and the obligations they lay themselves under to each other.

Then he left me. He went on his way to preach the gospel through Canada, and from thence to the south, and was gone for near two years before he returned. When he returned, he fulfilled an appointment he had left for a camp-meeting in conjunction with several of the preachers. Then, on September the fourth, 1804, late in the evening, we were joined in holy matrimony. There was not any present but the family and the preacher who performed the ceremony. Early the next morning, Lorenzo started for the Mississippi territory, in company with my brother-in-law, who intended to remove to that country should he like it. Lorenzo had
a chain of appointments, previously given out, for four thousand miles.

I expected to continue to live with my sister, as she had no children and was much attached to me -- or seemed to be so at the time -- but the Lord ordered it otherwise. My Lorenzo was gone about seven months before he returned to me. My brother-in-law was pleased with the Mississippi territory and intended to return to it with his family in a few months. My husband was preparing to go to Europe in the fall. He returned and stayed with me about two weeks. Then he started for Canada and left me with my sister. They were preparing to remove to the Mississippi in July, and this was May [1805]. Lorenzo was to meet them in the western country, where they were to carry me. From thence, all of us would go to New York city and they would continue on their journey to the Mississippi territory. Lorenzo went on as far as Vermont, where he held a number of meetings and saw his sisters that lived there. Then, feeling an impulse to return to me in Western, he gave up the intended tour through Canada and came back prepared to take me to New York City, where he intended to embark for Europe.

We stayed a few weeks in Western until my brother-in-law got his temporal concerns settled. Then, after bidding my friends and brethren in the Lord farewell, we set off for New York. We were attended by my sister, who went the same road we were going, eighteen or twenty miles. There Lorenzo held several meetings and we stayed together two or three days. Then my sister and I bid each other farewell, expecting to meet again in eighteen months or two years. But the providence of God did not favor this, or the interference of the enemy of mankind prevented, for we never met again. Could I have foreseen what awaited my unfortunate sister in the country to which she was bound, the parting would have been doubly distressing. But it is happy for us that we do not know what is in futurity, as the great Master knoweth best how to prepare our minds for greater tribulation while we travel through this world of woe. Our parting was truly sorrowful and afflicting, but it was light compared to what followed. We left Westmoreland and went down to Albany, where Lorenzo had some acquaintances. We stayed for several days at the house of Mr. Taylor and were treated as if we were their children.

Now my sphere of life was altered. It was the first time I had been so far from home without my sister; she was like a mother to me, as I knew no other. My heart often trembled at what was before me, to be continually among strangers. Being so little acquainted with the ways of the world, it made me feel like one at a loss how to behave or what to do.
Lorenzo was very affectionate and attentive to me. He left me at Albany with sister Taylor, who was going down to New York in a sloop. As I was very much fatigued by riding on horseback, he thought it best for me to go down with her by water. He went on by land, riding one horse and leading the other, and arrived in New York perhaps four and twenty hours before me. I went on board, for the first time that I ever was on the water except to cross a ferry.

It made me somewhat gloomy to be on board the vessel among strangers while going down the river to the city of New York, as I had never been in such a place before. We landed about ten o'clock at night and met Lorenzo, who had been on the look-out for some time. We went to the house of a friend, who then belonged to the Methodist church and that had been very kind to him in days past. I felt much embarrassed, as I had never been in the city before. We stayed in New York several weeks and had some precious meetings. Here I became acquainted with some kind friends, who were to me like mothers and sisters, whilst Lorenzo left me and went to fulfill some appointments he had made in Virginia and North Carolina.

Lorenzo had expected to be gone only five or six weeks, but was detained contrary to his expectation near three months. In that time, the fever that was common in the city of New York broke out. I went with Mrs. Quackenbush to the country, about forty miles up the river to a brother Wilson's, where she carried her children to go to school. Here I stayed several weeks. They were people of handsome property. But the more we have, the more we want -- as has been observed by many and, I think, will hold good almost without exception. They were much engaged to gain property, as if they had bread from only hand to mouth. I was a stranger, and many times I felt as such; but the Lord gave me support so that I was tolerably cheerful in the absence of my companion.

Before Lorenzo returned, I went back to New York. There I stayed until he came and prepared to sail for Europe some time in November. We obtained a protection from our government when leaving the country for England. It was necessary to have witnesses to prove that he was the Lorenzo Dow that was identified and intended in the documents which he had obtained from the United States of America. Consequently, he got N.S.⁵ and J.Q.⁶ to go before a notary public and certify that he was the Lorenzo Dow referred to in the documents. Mr. N.S. gave in under oath that he "knew him from his youth ... holy gospel." About the same time, however, he wrote letters to Ireland and England to make our way narrow in those countries. No thanks to him that it did not bring Lorenzo into the greatest distress and difficulties that a man
could have been brought into. But through the mercy of God it was otherwise overruled.

Lorenzo gave me my choice -- to go with him or stay with friends in America. There were many that told us I might stay with them, and be welcome as their children, and strove to prevent my going to a land where I would find many difficulties and dangers to encounter that I was unacquainted with and could not foresee. But I chose to go and to take my lot and share with him of whatever might befall us. Consequently on the 10th of November, 1805, we set sail from New York to Liverpool in Old England.

Notes for Chapter One

1. The meeting with Peggy's half-brother took place in June 1814 and places the final editing and first printing of this portion of Peggy's journal about 1815. In this edited reprinting, prayers and personal comments that interrupt the flow of the narrative are placed in italics.

2. Note Peggy's assumption that a preacher would travel a circuit requiring extended absence from home. The idea of a single church, or even several neighboring congregations, supporting a full-time preacher was unheard of in early rural and frontier America.

3. Frequently called "the Mississippi" later in the journal, the Mississippi Territory was organized in 1798 when Spain relinquished to the United States a 100 mile wide strip of land north of Western Florida, the Spanish-owned extension of the Florida panhandle that reached to the Mississippi River. In 1804, the territory was expanded to include most of present Mississippi and Alabama. In 1817, it was partitioned into the state of Mississippi and the Alabama Territory.

4. Western, the place where Peggy was living with her sister and brother-in-law when she met Lorenzo, is a small town near Rome, New York. In an area of the state known, about that time, for its religious fervor, Western was the site of the 1825 revival that first brought national attention to evangelist Charles G. Finney.

5. N.S. is Nicholas Snethen (1769-1845). Snethen, like Lorenzo Dow, was an independent spirit. A Methodist Episcopal minister from 1794 to 1830, he withdrew in 1830 to participate in the formal organization of the Methodist Protestant Church and to assume a prominent place in that new denomination. Snethen preached in all parts of the country and was much admired for his eloquence. Lorenzo's diary gives more detail about the unfavorable letters Snethen sent to England.
6. J.Q. is James Quackenbush, a layman of New York City who was a friend to Lorenzo. Years later, however, Quackenbush became involved in questionable dealings and fled to the West Indies to leave Lorenzo to face the legal and financial consequences.